

## Christian Dior and the House of Dior: A Love and Regard for Britishness Sets Apart the V&A's 'Designer of Dreams'

The lavish exhibition 'Christian Dior: Designer of Dreams', Sainsbury Gallery, Victoria & Albert Museum, London (2 February-14 July 2019) comprehensively depicts this highly influential French fashion designer. Originally opening in 2017 at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris, 'Christian Dior Couturier du Rêve' marked the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Christian Dior's founding at 30 Avenue Montaigne, Paris. This is the largest-ever exhibition dedicated to Dior, his life's oeuvre and that of subsequent artistic directors who have kept, and are keeping, his vision alive. 200 haute couture garments selected from the Dior Archives and the V&A Archives are shown alongside illustrations, photographs, magazines, films, perfume bottles, make-up, accessories and some of Dior's personal possessions.

The British curating differs from the French by showing around 50% new exhibits and adding a focus on Dior's adoration for anything British. He grew up in Granville, a picturesque coastal resort in Normandy, northern France where his childhood home was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Belle Époque villa, 'Les Rhumbs', complete with large English-style garden. The family home held a strong place in his heart; painted a soft pink that contrasted with the surrounding grey gravel - Dior referenced these two colours in his Paris atelier's interior design and frequently in his collections. This imposing clifftop home overlooked the English Channel and Dior's gaze would have looked to the horizon line between France and Britain, kindling an enduring relationship that was cemented when he first visited, aged 21. Dior chose to show collections at London's Savoy hotel and at Harrods; he founded 'CD Models London' and opened a London boutique, catering to his British clients. He also wore Savile Row suits and was cultured, speaking French, Spanish and English languages.

Oriole Cullen, Curator of Modern Textiles and Fashion at the V&A gives an insight into Christian Dior's particular obsession with British culture - royalty, aristocracy and especially the stately homes with their grand architecture and gardens. Several fashion shows have been staged at Blenheim Palace, Oxfordshire – for royalty and to benefit the British Red Cross. A true anglophile and nostalgic romantic, Dior embraced the traditions and enchantment of this island nation with strong influences finding their way into his collections. Structure and support were balanced with drape and fluidity for a duality that exemplified a true British spirit – seemingly formal with an underlying rebellious streak.

The V&A exhibition designed by Nathalie Crinière has eleven theatrical sections that visually communicate the history of the couture house from 1947 to the present day. These include '**Dior in Britain**' that demonstrates his penchant for British manufacturers, especially for knitwear and accessories. '**New Look**' shows his revolutionary debut for Spring/Summer 1947 with two lines 'Corolle' and 'En Huit' (famously dubbed the 'New Look' by Carmel Snow, editor-in-chief, Harper's Bazaar, USA), along with interpretations by subsequent designers for the House of Dior. S/S 1947 designs included the iconic 'Bar' suit that exemplified a bold architectural and voluminous form with vast amounts of fabric being used for long, full skirts that were teamed with soft-shouldered jackets with nipped-in waists and padded hips. Intended to offer an antidote to the previous military aesthetic of World War II utilitarian clothing, the collection was deemed controversial as its' reception garnered both

negative and positive responses – a conflict with post-war austerity, with rationing still in place, and a desire towards femininity, elegance and glamour. **'Dior Line'** examines the different silhouettes of his titled collections, including 'Zig-Zag' (S/S 1948), 'Sinueuse' (S/S 1952), 'H-line' (A/W 1954 - also referred to as the 'Flat Look') and 'Y-line' (A/W 1955). **'Historicism'** features Dior's love of the 18th century, and Belle Époque fashions. **'Designers for Dior'** looks at the artistic directors of the House of Dior: Yves Saint Laurent, Marc Bohan, Gianfranco Ferré, John Galliano, Bill Gaytten, Raf Simons and Maria Grazia Chiuri who have all remained loyal to the Dior codes. **'Diorama'** demonstrates collaborations that resulted in lipstick, perfume, fragrance bottles, costume jewellery and accessories. As a grand finale **'Ballroom'** presents the atelier's incredible couture expertise for evening and formal wear such as Princess Margaret's tulle gown with asymmetric gold embroidery worn to celebrate her 21st birthday in 1951. Dior's designs have been worn by many famous performers from stage and screen; included here are creations as seen on the red carpet worn by actresses Jennifer Lawrence, Charlize Theron, and Lupita Nyong'o.

This exhibition displays the far-reach and enduring legacy of haute couture that has, at its essence, a conceptual underpinning and an opportunity to dream. Also shown is a more grounded look with ready-to-wear luxe. The House of Dior and its long line of artistic directors perpetuates traditions and artisanal skills, imparting longevity to fashion, a phenomenon typically steeped in the ephemeral.

**Sarah E. Braddock Clarke**

**800 words**

### **Suggested Images**

Christian Dior. 'Bar' suit. Haute Couture, Spring/Summer 1947. Photograph by Laziz Hamani. Courtesy of the V&A.

Christian Dior. Models showing looks from the Autumn/Winter 1954 'H-line' collection in front of Blenheim Palace where a British Red Cross benefit fashion show was staged on 3 November 1954. Courtesy of Dior Heritage.

Christian Dior. Fête joyeuse, evening Dress. Haute Couture, Spring/Summer 1955, A-line. Photograph by Laziz Hamani. Courtesy of the V&A.

Christian Dior by Maria Grazia Chiuri. Evening dress. Haute Couture, Spring/Summer 2018. Photograph by Laziz Hamani. Courtesy of the V&A.